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The Ginney Block: Reminiscences of an Italian-American Dead-end Street Kid

Edward A. D'Alessandro

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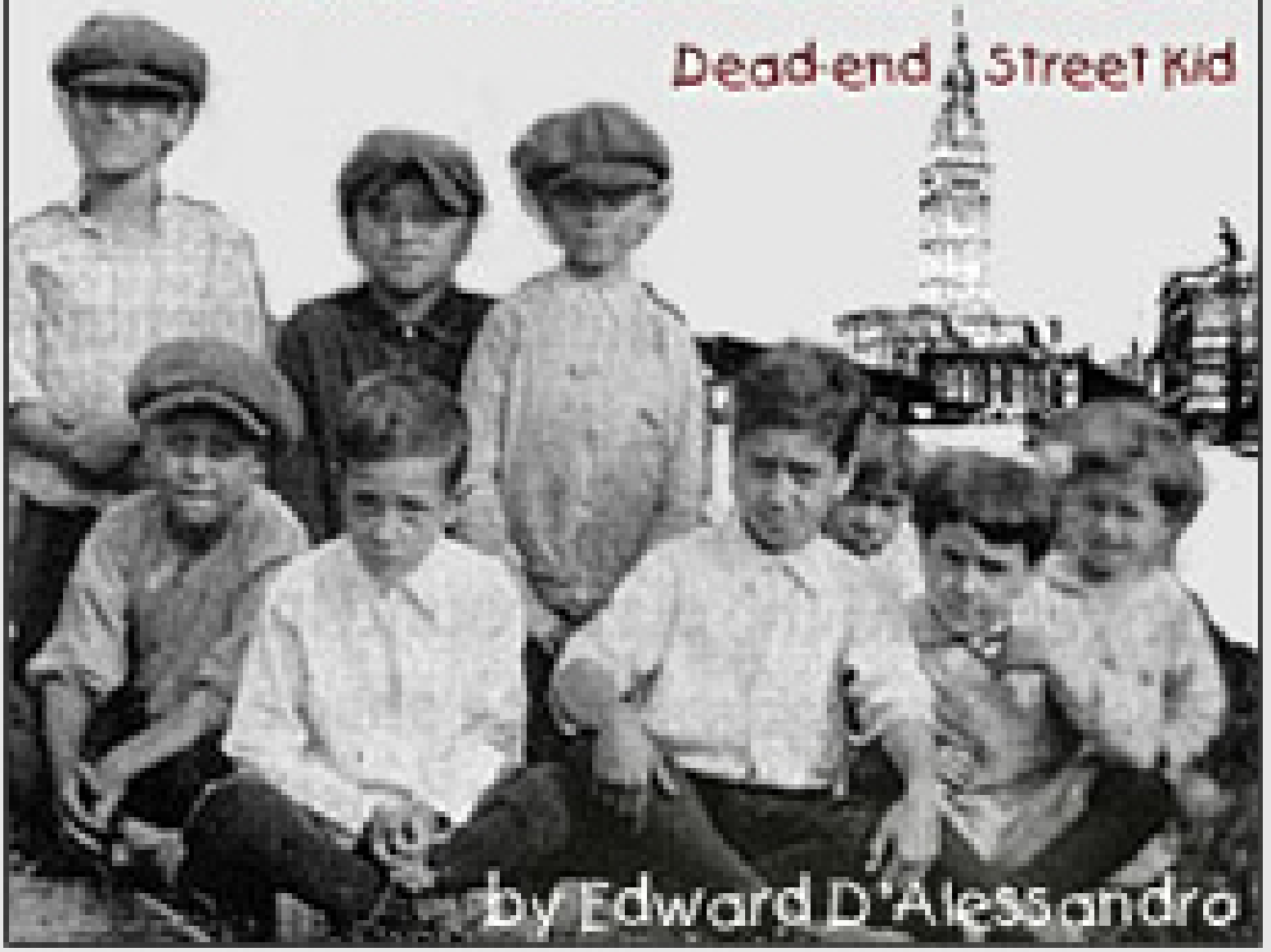

by Edward D'Alessandro

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Dedicated to the memory of my wife Grace who blessed me with her enduring love and loyalty until death did us part on June 12, 1973.

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Preface

I was a dead-end street kid. I was delivered by a mid-wife on a cold March Tuesday morning in a cold water, walk up flat in a three-story tenement. I was what you might call a disadvantaged kid but did not know it.

This book is the result of my long-standing desire to record some memories of my childhood and youth in a time and place long gone. The time-the 1920's and the place, a block located on Race Street, in the old Hay Market district of the city on the shores of Lake Erie, known as Cleveland, Ohio.

My reminiscences are in the form of vignettes that feature people and events that made an impact on me during the most impressionable years of my life, years spent in what was once known as "The Ginney Block."

The names of some of the people that figure in the vignettes have been changed for obvious reasons. The title "Ginney Block" is not used in the derogatory sense. Far from it. as an Italian-American, I am proud of my heritage and of the great strides made by people of my background in all walks of life in the United States of America. I have used the title because that is what the place of origin was called by people of other backgrounds when I lived there.

The Hay Market – circa turn of the century
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

Introduction

The Newcomb brothers, Henry and John had struck it rich in real estate before the turn of the century in the Hay Market district of Cleveland, Ohio. A large piece of property that they had purchased for speculation was situated on a bluff on the north side of a dead-end street called Race Street. For years the land lay undeveloped. It overlooked the industrial flats in the Cuyahoga River Valley, where the crooked river winds its serpentine way through the heart of the city and empties into Lake Erie. During those years, the Otis Steel Company had taken over the valley and filled it with huge blast furnaces with towering smoke stacks that belched grey, ghostlike smoke during the day while adjacent appendages spewed orange colored flames at night. Erie. The Baltimore and Ohio and the Wheeling and Lake Erie Railway Companies had brought in their shiny rails to serve the steel makers and the passenger trade of the growing industrial metropolis on the shores of Lake Erie.

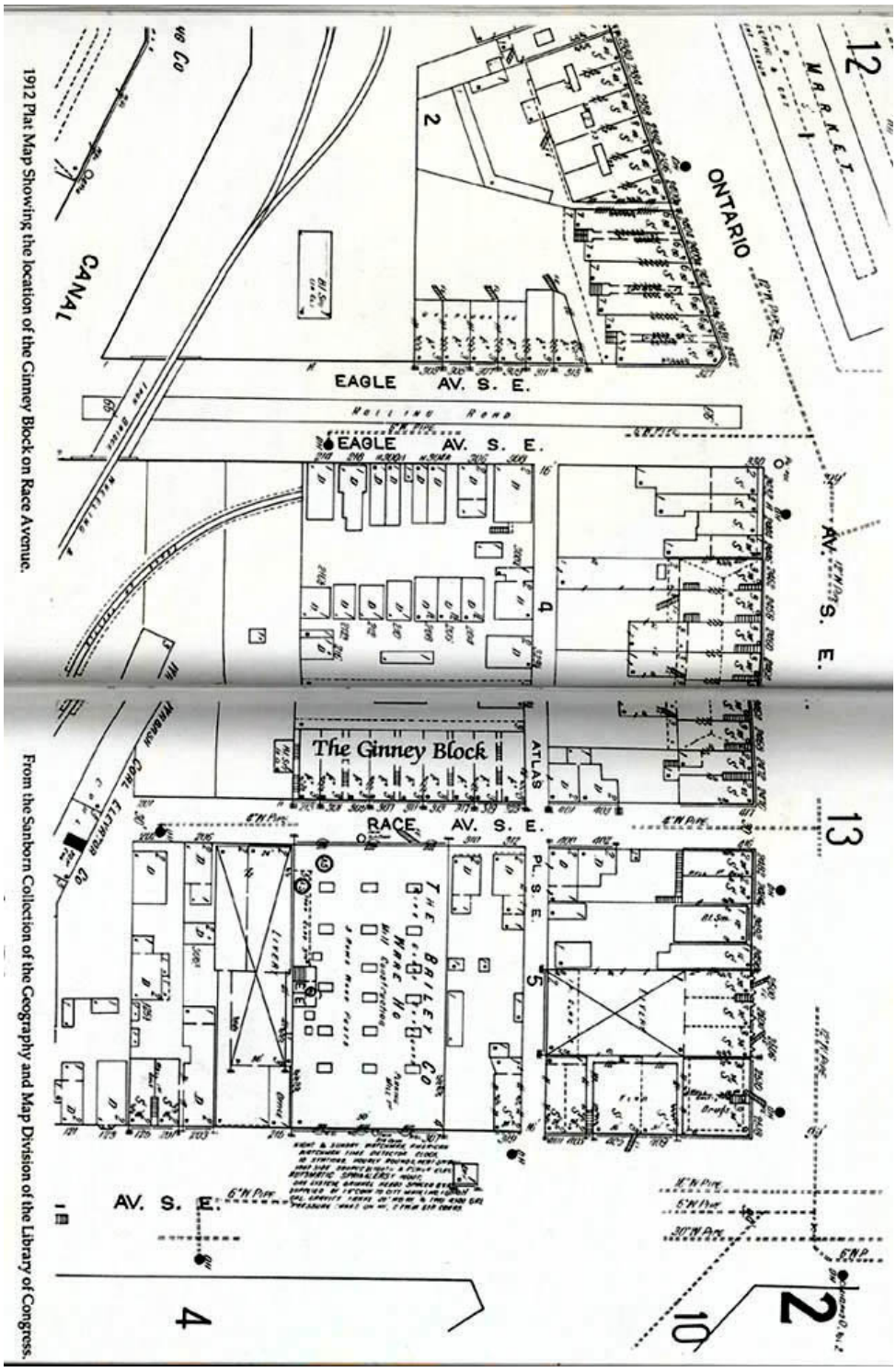
The steel and railway companies were attracting large numbers of Italian Immigrants who were coming from southern Italy at that time in ever increasing numbers. The Newcomb brothers had previously built a group of small, one story, four room frame houses at the rear of their property to meet the earlier influx of the Italians. As more and more families came, they began to double up in the modest frame homes.

Steel Mills in the Flats-circa 1939
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

The Newcomb brothers saw the need for something bigger in the way of housing for the paesanos or the ginneys as they

called them. They decided to capitalize on this need by constructing a building on the large tract in front of the small houses.

They built a three story, red brick tenement, which covered a half city block, facing on Race Street. The Newcomb Block, as it was first known, contained twenty-seven four room flats. Each flat had a large kitchen because the Newcomb brothers had learned that the Italians like big kitchens. The kitchens had two windows and a door that faced north and opened on to a large porch that ran the full length of the building on the second and third floor levels. In addition to the kitchen, each flat boasted two small windowless bedrooms. There was a small cubicle or closet which contained a commode on a raised platform, with a flush box with pull chain overhead. The largest room was called the front room, and served as my parents' bedroom, This was the only other room that had windows, and which looked out onto Race Street. The only sink in the flat was the one located in the kitchen, and it was limited to one cold water tap. The kitchen was equipped with a coal and wood burning stove, the only cooking and heating facility in the flat. Each room was equipped with a single gas jet for light. Since this type of lighting did not satisfy the lighting needs of the tenants, most of them supplemented the light from the gas jets with coal oil lamps. Access to the other rooms was from the kitchen via a long narrow corridor, which was also lighted by a coal oil lamp, attached to the wall like most of the others.



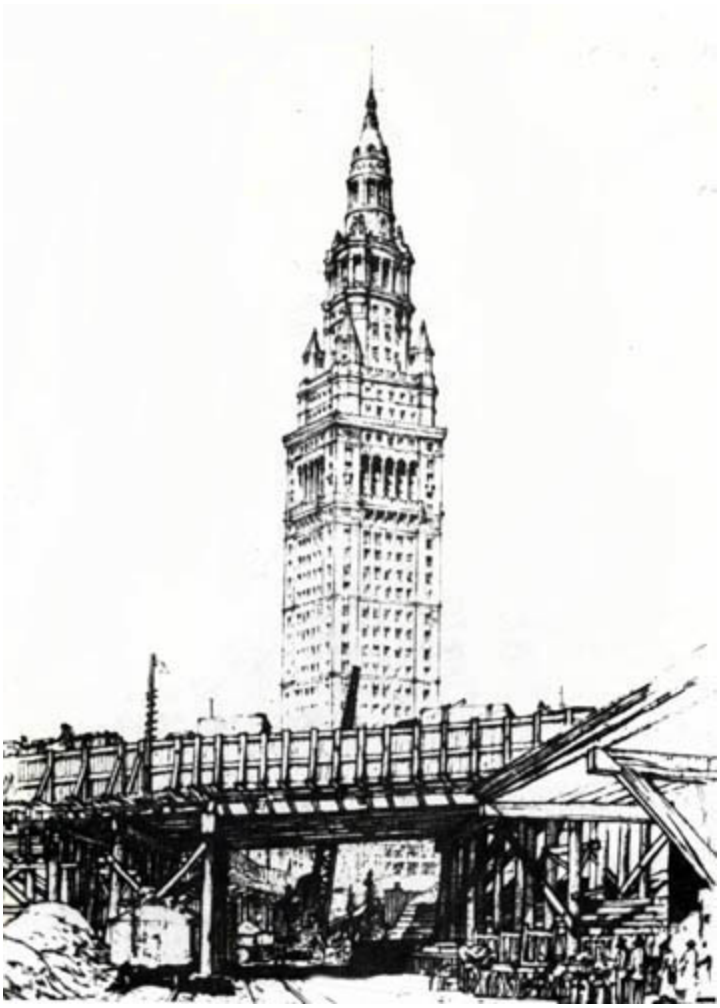
1912 Plat Map Showing the location of the Ginney Block on Race Avenue.
From the Sanborn Collection of the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress.
Courtesy of the Geography and Map Division of The Library of Congress.

Access to the flats from the streets was through five stairways. Each stairway had twenty-seven steps from the ground level to the second floor landing, and twenty-seven steps to the third floor landing. Each stairway provided ingress and egress for each flat. Each entrance from the street at ground level had a small vestibule, where the mailboxes for the tenants were affixed to the left hand wall. Each stairway in the building was lighted by a coal oil lamp, place on a built-in shelf, located high up in the corner of the walls at the top floor.

The tenants from each of the flats cooperatively maintained the lamps, contributed to the purchase of the coal oil, taking turns, on a schedule to clean, refill, light and put the lamps out each day at the required time. The stairway was swept daily by members of each of the families, who also took their turn scrubbing the steps on Saturdays also according to schedule.

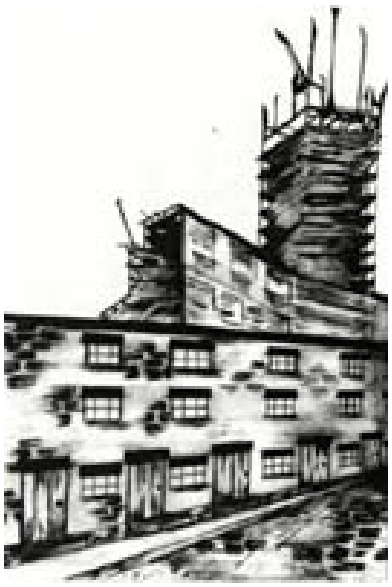
This was the Ginney Block where my father settled in November of 1900, after having lived and worked as an immigrant tailor in the sweat shops of the Garment District of New York City for a brief but painful three months, until he could earn enough money to be able to move on to Cleveland and friends who preceded him there. It was into this block that my father was finally financially able to afford to bring from Italy his wife, her father, and six-year-old first son, in May of 1906, after almost six long years of separation.

The Terminal Tower under construction in 1927. Viewed from the Public Square
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio



View of the Terminal Tower-circa 1928 from Southeast. From Set of Etchings by Louis Conrad Rosenberg. Commissioned by the Van Sweringen brothers and from the Collection of Frank Gerlak, and printed with his permission.

This was the Ginney Block where I was born and its environs which is the setting for the events portrayed in the following vignettes, which attempt to tell what life was like for an impressionable youngster growing up in the old Hay Market district of the City of Cleveland, before the area was eliminated forever by the Van Sweringen brothers for the building of the new railway approach to the city's first skyscraper, the fifty-two story Terminal Tower.



The Ginney Block

Maria Di Maria, Faith Healer and Dispeller of the Evil Eye

To me as a youngster, Maria Di Maria appeared to be at least 100 years old. Now, in retrospect, from the vantage point of my own advanced years, I must now concede that she was not more than seventy-five years of age. Nevertheless, she looked like a centenarian to me at that time, probably because her dark, leathery face was etched heavily with wrinkles. Her hair, which was drawn back tightly from her forehead to a knot at the back of her head was white, but not pure white. It had that tell-tale yellow that was due to infrequent washing. It was a known fact that Maria was bath shy, and rarely if ever bothered to wash her face in the morning. Proof of this, were the ever-present sleep bugs that nestled in the corners of her eyes, and that certain odor that emanates from old, unwashed bodies. Her eyes were brown, almost hidden under thick, bushy eyebrows. Her mouth was toothless except for two lone buck teeth that protruded like fangs from under a heavy upper lip. Despite all this, she had a warm, friendly face. Maria's body was short and squat. Year in and year out she wore a simple, black dress, along with a heavy, black shawl; garb that signified that she was still mourning her husband, who had been dead for about twenty years.

The Old Central Market -- circa 1932
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

As one of many children in the Ginney Block, I was destined to be treated by Maria Di Maria, faith healer and Dispeller of the evil eye. My first date with her as a fearful and unwilling patient had been in the making for at least two days before Thanksgiving Day. I had made the mistake of complaining about a persistent headache during those two days that preceded the holiday. Since the headache had continued more than a day, and was threatening to continue into the holiday, my mother decided that someone had cast the evil eye on me. After all hadn't she heard one of our neighbors comment about my beautiful, big dark brown eyes when I had accompanied her to do some shopping at the Central Market just two days ago? She was sure it was then that the evil eye had been laid upon me. Her mind was made up. There was nothing else to do but to take me to Maria. She would know how to cure me of my nagging headache and rid me of the evil eye that was causing the headache!

Feeling like a sacrificial lamb, I was led downstairs to flat number one, where Maria lived. My mother knocked on Maria's door. As we waited, I thought of all the scary stories that I had heard about Maria's place-the story that her flat was haunted by her dead husband, that at times she could be heard holding conversations with him and other old, dear departed friends, who had passed on many years ago. The door opened slowly and there she was beckoning us to come in. She ushered us into the kitchen, which served as her treatment room.

It was early evening. She had apparently just lit the coal oil lamp on her kitchen table. I could smell that characteristic smell of a recent lighting of an oil lamp's wick. The flickering light cast eerie shadows on the ceiling and walls.

My mother explained the reason for our visit. Without a word, Maria nodded and walked to the cupboard over the kitchen sink. She brought forth an ancient saucer, which was chipped around the edge. She then produced a can of olive oil from a lower cupboard. Fascinated, I watched her pour about one teaspoonful oil along with some water into the saucer. From a pocket in her black apron, she fished a large door key that looked like a jail door key. I could see that she was now ready for me. She motioned to me to come to her. Hypnotized, I approached her short, round figure. She quickly but gently engulfed me, placing her left arm around my neck. Her body odor almost overcame me, and her heavy, asthmatic breathing startled me. She dipped the key in the mixture of water and olive oil and raised it, dripping the oily mixture to my forehead, and with her fat, pudgy right hand proceeded to make the sign of the cross between my eyebrows.

The treatment was over suddenly as it had begun, without a word from Maria. My mother knew, as she paid Maria her usual fee of twenty-five cents that my headache would be gone by morning. At least, that is what my mother told me as we left Maria's place on that Thanksgiving eve.

The Rolling Road under construction – circa 1905
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

Death on Christmas Eve

There is one Christmas Eve day in my youth that is seared in my memory. It was that fateful holiday time, when I came face to face with violent death.

Several days before Christmas Eve, while walking home from school, I made a date with Joe Santorelle and several of my other close friends and neighbors of the Ginney Block, to meet bright and early Christmas Eve morning to go belly slamming down the Rolling Road, our favorite winter time slope for sledding because it offered a fast quarter mile run from top to bottom.

The Rolling Road by this time, in disrepair and not operational had been a unique road. It was probably the first and only one of its kind. As I remember it, there were actually three roadways side by side. The center road was the only one that had rolled or moved. You might describe it as an escalator without steps. Wide, wood slats formed the road surface, attached to great moving cables underneath, that continuously drew the slatted road up and down, just as department store escalators do today. This special road had been built for transporting heavy laden, horse drawn wagons that once delivered lumber from the yards located in the industrial valley below the city on the hill. The two cobble stone roads on either side were for the lighter vehicles that could make it up the hill on their own power, and for the empty wagons on their way back down to the yards after having completed their deliveries.

Cobble stone side of the abandoned Rolling Road -- circa 1927
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

It was one of these side roads that we used for sledding on snowy weekends and holidays because traffic was almost non-existent on such days and we had the road to ourselves.

At this particular Christmas time, several days of heavy snows had been nicely packed down on the cobble stone road, making it ideal for belly slamming down the hill.

I can see myself as a ten year old with Joe and the gang, all pretty close to me in age and daring. Joe was slightly older, about twelve, and always the leader and more daring than the rest of us.

It was cold and crisp. Heavy snow flakes, the good sticking and packing down kind, were falling from a grey sky that promised to lay another blanket over the accumulated layers of snow which nicely covered the left roadway that we had decided to use on that fateful Christmas Eve morning.

As we lined up at the top of the hill, I could barely see Canal Road at the foot of the hill. Canal Road was a main road in the industrial flats below. Canal Road and the flats were usually deserted on the day before Christmas. I recall that our course down hill looked mighty fast that morning, as I got a firm grip on my home-made sled made of metal runners and slats from orange crates salvaged from the Old Market House, located on Ontario Street at the top of the hill.

All of a sudden, I heard Joe say, "Ready, Get Set, Go!" he had pulled a fast one on us. There he was, speeding down the hill before we knew what was happening.

View from the bottom of the abandoned Rolling Rd. circa 1927
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

The rest of us, like horses, left at the post, flung ourselves on to our sleds, hitting them hard with our heavily clothed bodies. We were soon flying down the hill, many lengths behind Joe, who was already a third of the way down the hill. As a belly slammer, I had always been pretty quick, so I soon found myself in second place but still far behind Joe, as he approached Canal Road. I was about fifty yards behind him as he entered Canal Road. At the same time, a Mack Truck, one of the fleet that the lumber company had begun to use as replacements for its horse drawn wagons, appeared out of nowhere. Joe's fast moving sled carried him right under the wheels of the truck. In horror, I slammed my sled into the stone abutment that separated the left roadway from the rolling road in the center. Bruised and shaken, I ran down to where Joe lay. Blood was streaming from his mouth, nose and ears. The agitated truck driver pulled me away from the scene, as I started retching in great convulsive heaves.

Maria and My Father Clash

Normally my father was a quiet and peaceful man. The only time that I saw him lose his temper completely was at the time that it had become known that my mother was with child again. As a child I was very aware of things. Being precocious, I was blessed with more than the usual amount of curiosity. To make matters worse, I was a good listener and remembered practically everything I heard.

I recall being present when my mother told Maria that she was pregnant again. I remember hearing Maria's raspy voice as she advised my mother that at age 37, she was too old to have another child, especially after she had already had 5, that she recommended that my mother visit Signora Angelina Martino, who lived over on Hill Street. Upon hearing Signora Martino's name, my mother became quite agitated and nervous. She hastily begged to be excused and hustled me out of Maria's flat.

That evening, at the dinner table, not knowing that Signora Martino was an abortionist, I asked my mother why Maria told her to see that lady who lived over on Hill Street. My mother's face turned crimson as she looked across the table at my father. He reacted instantaneously. He seemed to know all about Signora Martino and why Maria had advised my mother to visit her.

Without asking for details, he abruptly left the table and headed straight for Maria's place downstairs.

Before I could be stopped, I followed my father. Reaching Maria's door my father thumped on it imperiously. Frightened, I remained on the landing above. In the flickering light of the coal oil lamp that illuminated the stairway, I could see Maria's questioning face appear in the doorway. My father delivered his message. It was short but clear. "Se tu parlare con mia moglie un altra volta, Io ti taglio la tua capo!" "If you speak to my wife again, I will cut your head off!" Maria's dark leathery complexion turned pale with fear. She bowed meekly, saying, "Io ho capito, don Rocco!", "I understand Don Rocco," and hastily closed her door.

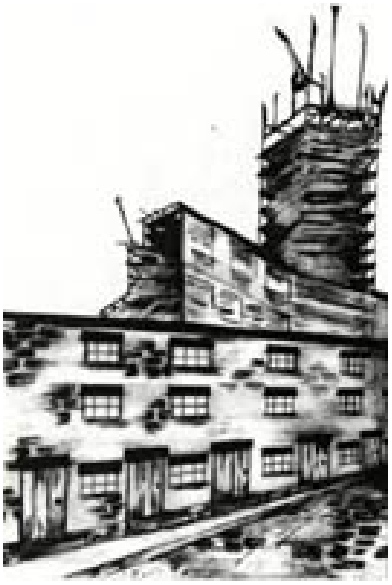
Later that night, while in bed, I heard my father talking with my mother. What he said to her has come back to me many times over the years. His words were quite prophetic. They were, "The child you are carrying shall not be destroyed, as Maria has advised! Who knows what important work this child may be called on to do in this world of ours, God alone knows! "That child, my mother's last, my younger brother Art, grew up to become a general surgeon, who served in five campaigns in World War II as a battle field surgeon, helped found a hospital in one of Cleveland's largest suburbs and used his surgical skills to help those who came to him for almost forty years.

Innocents Abroad

On a Saturday morning of an August day, I awoke early to a hot, muggy, steamy day. The room in our four room flat that served as my bedroom was a small windowless square. The lack of air made it as hot as a steam bath. I lethargically pulled myself out of the bed that I shared with my younger brother, walked in a daze down the narrow corridor to the cubicle that served as our toilet room. After taking care of nature's call, I proceeded to perform my morning ablutions, with a perfunctory tooth brushing and by splashing cold water on my face and head from the single faucet that supplied only cold water. Before I could be stopped by mother, I bolted out the door and flew down the fifty-four steps at the rear of building to the back yard, giving a deaf ear to my mother's entreaties to wait for breakfast. As I hoped, I ran into Danny Monteleone, one of my close friends, who was kicking a tin can around. I joined him, competing with him, trying to kick the can before he could, every now and then kicking one another in the shins until we tired of this spontaneous bit of fun.

On the spur of the moment, we decided to explore the hillside behind the frame houses that perched on the edge of the property, to see if we might be lucky enough to find some pieces of iron or other salvage items of value, to sell to old Harris, the neighborhood junk dealer, who was located at the end of our street.

At this point in time, these houses had been abandoned by some of the Italian families who had decided to move to Little Italy, the Italian settlement up on Murray Hill, way out on the East side of Cleveland. These houses were now inhabited by colored folk. The houses were separated from the very edge of the bluff by a narrow pathway, no more than six feet in width. In order to reach the rough hewn log steps that led to the bottom of the hill, Danny and I had to walk the pathway quite close to the low back windows of the third house, we heard peculiar sounds and moans. Danny and I filled with the normal curiosity of youth, could not resist the temptation to look in to see what was going on. The scene that greeted our eyes was a new and horrifying sight, one that I have not forgotten. It was our introduction as innocent youngsters to the sex act. For the first time in our lives, we saw a naked man and woman engaged in a physical embrace that actually shook the bed. Wide-eyed, in disbelief, we recognized Tom, a light skinned colored man, sprawled over a white woman. Terror stricken, we fled the scene, feeling sick and a great sense of shame.



The Eagle Elementary School – circa 1928
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

Boxing Lessons

In the 1920's, Eagle Elementary School served a dual purpose for the young denizens of the Ginney Block. First, it was the place where we toiled during the day, learning the Three R's as the formal education learning process was known in those days. Second, it served as our Social Center. At night, during the winter months, from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. the Cleveland Board of Education provided and opened its gyms to the boys and girls of the neighborhood. In the summer time, the school Board ran a playground in its outdoor areas.

I recall one winter when the athletic program brought to the boy's gym an added attraction. Up until that winter, the program had limited itself to basketball and wrestling. This particular winter the recreation supervisor outdid himself. He brought in an ex-boxer and retired light-heavy weight fighter to teach those of us who were so inclined, to learn the manly art of self defense.

Although, at age twelve, I was slight and small in build, I felt the urge to learn how to box. As would be expected of the youngsters of our time, I had also developed an overwhelming hero worship for Jack Dempsey. When I registered for the class, I learned that the classes were to be held every Tuesday night, and that I must not miss any of them if I was to get the full benefit of the professional fighter's instructions. I was also told that I must be sure to bring my gym shoes and my gym pants.

From left to right: brothers Sol, Art, and the author circa 1922.

Brother Art and older brother Sol sparring in the yard at West End of the Ginney Block -- circa 1922.

The recreation supervisor also warned us that the instructor expected everyone to wash his gym shoes and pants after each boxing class so that they would be fresh and clean for the next week's session. That was no problem for me because my mother did that after every gym class anyway. So I was sure that one more washing would not bother her.

Things went swimmingly for me. Being small and wiry, I was quick on my feet. I exhibited good foot work. My biggest problem was the fact that my hands were small and I had trouble keeping the boxing gloves on. As my hands perspired inside the gloves, they would slip off even though they had been tied as securely as possible. The instructor finally solved this problem for me by taping them on me in addition to tying them tightly.

Being an apt pupil, I learned to weave and dance around the ring just as the professional did and learned to jab and uppercut as he did, much to his delight. Through all the sessions that season, I had somehow miraculously escaped being hurt by any of the punches that had been thrown at me by my adversaries. This was true until the final night of the course. On that Tuesday night, I had my "come-uppance." On that night I was matched with a Syrian boy from Bolivar Road. He was about my size, however, about five pounds heavier, stocky and with a longer reach than I had. As children, we were only allowed to box three rounds. I got through the first two rounds suffering only a few glancing blows to my arms and shoulders. Then out of the blue, I felt the glove on my opponent's right hand sink into my midriff.

The lights went out for me then and there. When I came to, I

saw my older brother Nick was holding me as the ex-fighter was sponging my face with cold water. Feeling awfully sick and weak, I got to my feet apologizing for losing the fight, for I really and truly thought that the other boy had scored a knockout. Much to my surprise, I was told that I had won because the boy had fouled me by hitting me below the belt. While this made me feel somewhat better, I vowed then and there that the fight game was not for me, and said so, as my worried brother helped me wobble home.

Our First Christmas Tree

Up until the Christmas season of the year 1923 our family celebrated Christmas without a Christmas tree, just as every other family in the Ginney Block. The only places that we children were able to see and enjoy decorated Christmas trees in those days were in school or on the Public Square, where the City annually erected a large tree as its greeting to the citizenry. Our family Christmases, which were religiously oriented, did allow us as children to hang our long black stockings on a chair molding that ran along the kitchen walls. Each Christmas Eve, our parents would lightly hammer some nails in the molding that ran along the kitchen stove. The nails served as hooks, upon which we would hang our stockings with anxious anticipation. That was the only sign that indicated that we as children expected a visit from the jolly one whom we used to call Santo Nicolo, who only brought gifts to good children.

The Christmas tree had never been a part of our celebration until this particular year, and only by happenstance. At the close of school on the last day before the start of the Christmas school vacation, Miss Jeannette Rice, the sixth grade teacher spotted my brother Sol and me as we were leaving the building. She came over to us and asked if we would like to have the Christmas tree that she had brought into her classroom during the previous week for the enjoyment of her children. She told us that we were welcome to take it home.

We accepted the offer with alacrity. We were so anxious to get the tree home that we picked it up, stand and all, completely decorated with tinsel, popcorn balls, paper chain decorations, and candles, quickly carried it out of Miss Rice's classroom, lock, stock and barrel. I can recall the look of surprise and amazement on Miss Rice's face. I am sure that she had thought that we would first remove all the decorations before attempting to carry it home, which was several city blocks away. I am sure we made quite a sight as we crossed four major thoroughfares, slowly picking our way home, trying hard not to jiggle the tree too much because we did not want to lose any of the candles or decorations. When we arrived at the Ginney Block, our astonished neighbors watched as we gingerly carried it up the two flights of twenty-seven steps to our flat. Our parents were even more surprised and shocked to see a completely decorated Christmas tree, stand and all, practically walk into their kitchen without any prearrangement or warning. I am sure that at first they did not know whether to be angry or happy at the prospect of having to make room for a tree that was already starting to shed its needles. The look on their faces made our hearts sink, as we realized that our living quarters were very tight, and that space was at a premium. Then our hearts leaped as we saw the look of consternation on our parents' faces turn to great big smiles. As I look back on it now I think that they must have realized how much we wanted that tree and that we had performed quite a feat by transporting it all the way from school, without losing a single trinket or candle.

To our happy surprise our parents rearranged the kitchen furniture to make room in one corner for the tree. On that

Christmas Eve, we lit the candles and sat around it until bedtime, at which time the candles were put out and we were hustled off to bed. That was the only Christmas in the Ginney Block that we ever had the pleasure and luxury of a Christmas tree when we arose Christmas morning and rushed to see what Santo Nicolo had left for us in our long black stockings. Although, as always, we found an apple, an orange, some hard candy, and a small ten cent store toy such as a miniature auto made of cast iron, we were especially happy because we were able to sit around a real live Christmas tree with real live candles and decorations for the first time in our lives.

Maria and Concetta Gossip

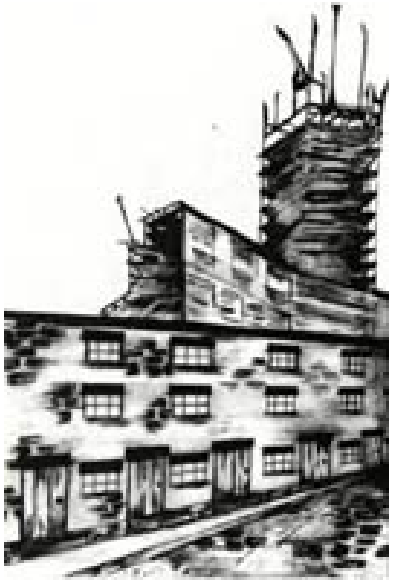
It was mid-afternoon on an extremely hot, steamy, August day. I had spent the early afternoon with some the other boys at the Eagle Elementary School playground on Eagle Avenue, about four blocks away from the Ginney Block. As I recall the events of that day, I had overheard the playground instructor say that it was at least 100 degrees in the shade, that it was the kind of weather not fit for man or beast, that he was closing the playground early, before he had any sunstroke or heat exhaustion cases on his hands. Hearing this, I decided to head for home before he blew the whistle. When I reached the Ginney Block, and approached the entrance to the stairway that led to our flat, I found Maria Di Maria and Concetta Cottone seated on the stoop, blocking the doorway. They were engaged in animated conversation, and chose to ignore my arrival and apparent desire to get by them to go upstairs. By this time, I was so hot that the perspiration was rolling down my face and dropping like beads to the sizzling sidewalk. I could feel the sweat running down my legs under my sticky trousers. All I could think about was, why don't they move and let me by? By this point, I had to get upstairs for two urgent reasons. One, to get to the commode to unburden myself of what felt like a gallon of urine, and two, to refill with some cold lemonade that I knew that my mother usually kept in the ice box on hot summer days.

With playground friends circa 1922. The author and the author's youngest brother Art are seated in front at the right side.

Oldest brother Nick as playground instructor circa 1922 at Eagle School. The author is in front row at extreme right.

Maria and Concetta continued to ignore me because they were involved in a hot bit of gossip about Philomena Tronti's 18-year old daughter, Giuseppina, who, Concetta was saying, had been brought home at 2:00 a.m. that morning by two men in a black touring car, and unceremoniously pushed out of the car, stark naked. Concetta, at the moment was describing what had happened, how Giuseppina looked. Concetta was using her hands and body to show how Giuseppina's large derriere gleamed in the moonlight. All the tenants in the Ginney Block knew that Concetta was a night owl and often sat in her darkened front room at her ground floor windows, just to see what she could on hot summer nights, to gossip about later.

As Concetta related her juicy tid-bit, with devilish glee, Maria's, short, squat, fat frame began to convulse and shake with paroxysms of laughter. I could stand it no longer, so I ran down to the end of the street, behind the block's service shed, where I finally was able to answer nature's call.



A Family of Bootleggers Comes to the Neighborhood

Toward the end of our stay in the Ginney Block, a new element moved into the neighborhood. The Campo family, a family of bootleggers, bought the two story frame house that sat at the very end of Race Street, across the street from an abandoned coal yard that separated the Ginney Block from the edge of the bluff on the west side. This house became the headquarters of the Campo Brothers, whose reputation as bootleggers had become legend in the city of Cleveland since the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, which had ushered in the Prohibition Era. This was the year 1926, and by this time the Campo Brothers' fame as purveyors of illegal liquor throughout the city and state of Ohio, was only exceeded by their notoriety for mayhem and violence in the conduct of their bootlegging business. They apparently had moved into the house in the early morning hours over a weekend, without the neighborhood's knowledge.

We, the Ginney Block families, were shocked and angry because we were all well aware of the Campo family's reputation. We all felt betrayed by the former owner of the house-- old Mr. Harris the junk dealer who had lived there as a widower since his wife had died some years ago, and had conducted his junk dealings quietly, bothering no one.

As neighborhood children, we liked him, because he was a

good source of spending money. We enjoyed scavenging for scrap iron and other junk. We also enjoyed taking it to Mr. Harris because it was fun bargaining with him; trying always to get him to up his first offer. As I look back on our youthful deals with old and shrewd Mr. Harris, I really believe that my ability to negotiate today stems back to my early dealings with Harris, the junk man. We all knew that Mr. Harris must have gotten a very nice price from the Campo family for the house. And so it was that the toughest bootleggers in town became our neighbors, much to our dismay and fear.

It wasn't very long before we got to know the Campo family. Much to our surprise, we found that Carlo, the older of the two Campo Brothers, was married. When we met his wife and children, we were amazed to find that they were warm and friendly people. Mrs. Campo was a very attractive, light skinned colored woman, tall, a little on the heavy side, with a beautiful head of auburn hair, bobbed much in the style worn by Clara Bow the movie star. We got to know her as a person who loved children, forever spoiling her own, while at the same time being generous to a fault in her hospitality to those of us who became friends with Mary and young Carlo. Mary and Carlo had inherited their mother's looks, both having the same golden skins and the same attractive auburn hair . Mary, who was sixteen, became the belle of the neighborhood, constantly surrounded by the neighborhood's young men of her age. Carlo, who was close to me in age, became one of my best friends. In fact he and Herbert Jordan Spicer, another young colored boy, and I became inseparable.

I thought Mrs. Campo had a pretty name. It was Leola. It seemed to roll off of Carlo Senior's lips lovingly and mellifluously when he spoke to and about her. The love he showed her and his children belied the cruel, hard reputation that he had gotten over the years in his business. I thought, he had to be two different personalities, the one he showed when he was with his family and the other that came through in his business dealings.

Early one day during Spring vacation,, Carlo Junior, my brother Art, Herbert and I had gone to the Old Market House on Ontario Street. [We] begged orange crates from one of the fruit vendors, one crate for each of us; carried them back to Carlo Junior's back yard, where we attached the orange crates to two-by-fours, four feet long, under which we affixed ball-bearing wheels salvaged from old, partially broken roller skates that we had gotten at the Salvation Army for ten cents a piece. In a matter of an hour or so we built skooters to race on the smooth asphalt pavement of our street.

That afternoon while testing our skooters, we noticed a black touring car with four well dressed men in dark suits and dark grey hats, enter our street. We watched the car drive slowly down to the end of the street and turn into the abandoned coal yard across the street from the Campo house. We thought nothing of it. In fact I thought that the men looked a lot like the men who used to run the coal yard before it went out of business a couple of years before.

Young Carlo, my brother Art, Herbert and I decided to race each other on our newly made skooters. We began at the Ontario end of our street, having decided that we would end the race in front of young Carlo's house. As we reached the house, neck and neck, in a dead heat, gun fire erupted; bullets were flying over our heads from the coal yard into the second floor windows of friend Carlo's house. We saw Carlo Senior in one of the upstairs windows returning the fire. As we dropped to the street to protect ourselves, we saw the four men in black run across the street, into the Campo House, where we heard sustained gun fire for several seconds. The shooting stopped as suddenly as it had started. We got up quickly and ran behind the Ginney Block to hide. Thoroughly frightened, we stayed there until we heard the touring car roar off down the street. Herbert, my brother Art and I ran to our respective homes as Carlo Junior, crying and scared to death, ran into his house. A short time later we learned that Carlo Senior had been wounded, presumably by former associates.

Maria Treats a Broken Ankle

During the summer of 1923, a number of families moved out of the Ginney Block because they had become more affluent. One of those families was headed by my mother's first cousin. They had moved into a small detached house, a bungalow as they used to call them in those days. It was located on Colburn Avenue on the lower west side of Cleveland, near West 25th Street. For weeks following their move to their new home they had extended repeated invitations to visit them on some Saturday or on some Sunday afternoon.

I recall that my parents finally decided to visit the cousin's family on a Sunday early in July after church services. Arrangements for this visit had been confirmed the week before. Since it was Sunday, we were all in our Sunday best. I can still see my father in one of his own recently tailor made three piece suits. It was a handsome blue serge, with a three button coat with narrow lapels, vest, and trousers that tapered neatly and stylishly to the ankles. He wore a pair of highly shined black shoes as was his habit in those days, My mother wore a beautiful white blouse, with a flowing black bow, tied loosely at the collar, a black skirt, with matching cloth belt and a tailored black jacket. My six year old younger brother Art and I completed the party. My brother wore an outfit that we used to call rompers in those days. You had to step into them, because you had to be buttoned up the back.

They sported little white collars that were attached by buttoning them at the back of the neck. The trouser legs came down to just below the kneecaps where they were held tightly over long black stockings by sewn-in elastic bands. I, too, like my father, wore a blue serge suit with a white shirt with a blue tie. It had a double breasted jacket, also with narrow lapels, and trousers that came down to the knees, held with sewn-in black bands just above the knees. I too wore long black stockings. This had been my first communion outfit. Being a Sunday, Maria and other neighbors were sitting outside of the block in kitchen chairs that the ground floor tenants used to bring out to the sidewalk, to sit in the sun on nice summer days. Seeing us in our Sunday clothes, Maria asked, "Dove va?" "Where are you going?" My mother replied, "Andiamo in casa da mia cugino." "We are going to my cousin's house." In her usual crepe hanging fashion, Maria said, "Guardati dai pericolo." "Beware of danger!" My parents merely nodded and we proceeded to walk to the Public Square to get the West 25th Street Car.

We managed to get to the cousin's house without incident, and as expected, we were fed a nice lunch. As the women folk did the dishes and when the men retired to the living room to smoke their cigars and finish the wine left over from lunch, my brother and I decided to explore the front porch which was something new to us. Being a bungalow, it had a nice wide front porch with a swing, hanging by chains from the porch ceiling. We sat on the swing for awhile swinging back and forth until we tired of it.

On the spur of the moment, we decided to play "Stump the Leader." I being the elder decided that we should begin by jumping off the porch, over the five steps to the sidewalk. Being ten years old, I accomplished this feat without any problem. My brother followed suit gamely; however, when he jumped, instead of landing flatly on his feet, his right ankle twisted as he landed. I heard an awful crack. My heart fell as I heard my brother scream with pain as he crumpled to the sidewalk. Needless to say this abruptly ended our visit. I will never forget the trip home with my poor brother crying all the way home on the Street Car. In those days the people of the Ginney Block did not have telephones so there was no way of calling an ambulance to get to the nearest hospital, St. Vincent Charity at East 22nd and Central Avenues, many blocks away from the Ginney Block.

Much as my father disliked the idea, he was convinced by my mother that the only thing to be done was to take my brother to Maria, that she would be able to take care of him. This was to be my second experience in Maria's place. This time only as an observer and not as the patient. Again I recall entering Maria's flat, following my mother and my father who was carrying my injured brother in his arms. Maria asked, "Che successo?" "What has happened?" My father explained quickly, and then asked, "Avete aiuto per povero Arturino?" "Can you help poor Arturino?" Maria nodded and again proceeded to her cupboard over the kitchen sink, this time bringing out a deep bowl. From her ice box she brought forth a half dozen eggs.

From a large metal canister on the counter next to the kitchen sink she produced three cups of baking flour. She quickly mixed the eggs and the flour in the bowl beating the concoction vigorously with a large wooden spoon for several minutes. She then cut up an old but clean bed sheet, cutting out five strips about four inches wide, and around twelve inches long. She smeared the egg and flour mixture on the first strip and tied it around my brother's ankle. She then tied the remaining four bed sheet strips over the first one, pinning them all together with safety pins. My father paid her the usual fee of twenty-five cents and we returned to our flat, very much surprised that my brother had stopped crying and concluded that apparently his pain had eased or subsided. In later years I have reasoned that the wet bed sheet strips with the home made poultice had had a psychological or physically soothing effect, and that Maria's treatment may have resulted in temporary relief. The relief, however, was short lived, because my brother in subsequent days had to be treated by a medical doctor before he finally gained normal use of the right leg and ankle. He, however, was Maria's last patient as far as our family was concerned.

Jimmy McGinty, Councilman and Manager of the Ginney Block

Jimmy McGinty was a self-made man, one who really had pulled himself up by his bootstraps. It was said that he had educated himself by reading his way through the bookshelves of the Public Library.

We the tenants of the Ginney Block got to know him when he became Manager of the block. Jimmy McGinty moved into the first ground floor flat at the far east end of the building, and set it up as his office. Within days he had not only sumptuously furnished the office, but also had hired a young and very pretty secretary to help him. Her name was Helen Malinski.

Jimmy and Helen made a good pair. He turned out to be a good manager and she a good right hand for him. I can still see them both in my mind's eye. He was short, about five feet four inches tall, wiry and well built. I would say that he was in his early fifties at the time. He had a full head of hair that had turned grey at the temples. He had a pug nose and a ruddy complexion. He was always immaculately dressed and well groomed, given to wearing three piece suits. He seemed to favor plaids and stripes, and all white suits and straw hats in the summertime.

Helen was a tall, willowy, natural blond beauty. She was very thin and her figure today would be compared to that of Twiggy.

She had a clear complexion, without a blemish. All in all she was blessed with the good, wholesome looks so often associated with many young Polish women. She was also very smart and ran an efficient office for Jimmy, not only managing to collect the rents on time but also following through on the maintenance and repair needs of the tenants. The fact that she was so pretty and so amiable and pleasantly efficient, made Jimmy's job of managing the building so easy as to make it possible for him to devote most of his time to his full time career.

We soon learned that in addition to being our building manager, Jimmy was also our councilman! Up until that time the residents of the Ginney Block had not paid too much attention to local politics or even state or federal politics for that matter. They were too busy trying to make a living, raise their children, and to adjust to the new way of life in their adopted land.

Jimmy changed all that in a hurry. He soon got all the men who had become naturalized citizens to become active in his campaigns not only by getting them to vote, but also working them into his political machine. He got all the non-citizens to become active, to apply for their citizenship papers; helped them to get instruction so they could pass their tests and to get their citizenship papers. Having been a self-educated man himself, he worked tirelessly to help his tenants to do the same. As a result, he built a sizable following among the Ginney Block tenants, a number of whom eventually secured city jobs with his help, and so were able to pull themselves out of their laboring jobs.

I can recall several of Jimmy's campaigns for reelection. While I did not learn about the phrase "Bread and Circuses" until I got to High School, I can now see how Jimmy McGinty's "bread and circuses" helped him get elected every time. Although he had built a formidable political machine over the years, I had the feeling then that he really believed that the only way he could insure his reelection each time was by wining, dining, and entertaining his constituents in the biggest "bash" possible. Each time at the close of his campaign on the eve of the election, he would take over a large area located south of the Ginney Block, immediately behind the old Bailey Department Store Warehouse, the area once known as the Hay Market, the place where years before the farmers brought their large hay wagons, loaded with hay for sale. The old Hay Market site was rented from the City by Jimmy and converted on the eve of election day into the biggest party place that I had ever seen. Several days before, workmen would come in, erect temporary poles for stringing colorful Japanese lanterns; caterers would bring in serving tables, outdoor kitchen equipment, hundreds of wooden carpenter's horses over which hundreds of pieces of plywood were placed to form tables for the hundreds of guests expected. A temporary band shell was erected for bands he hired to entertain the crowd; and last but not least a speakers' platform from which he and his staff of political orators always made their final speeches of exhortation on behalf of his candidacy.

Election eves for me in those days were exciting nights. They

were nights when all kinds of food, Italian, Irish, Polish, German and soul food for the colored folk of the community abounded. Wine, beer and hard liquor flowed freely for the adults who wanted it; soda pop of various kinds, cakes, cookies, pies, and candy for the children were also there in abundance. Those were nights that I now remember as Jimmy McGinty's night for "bread and circuses," which he had been known to say, "cinched" the elections for him!

Maria Makes A Prediction

In June of 1924 my brother Nick became the first in the Ginney Block and the first in the neighborhood to graduate from college. The other parents in the block could not understand why my father had permitted my brother to continue school after he finished high school, instead of sending him to work on one of the B & O railroad repair crews or into the Steel Mills in the flats below. All of the other sons of the families in the block had gone to work as soon as they had finished the eighth grade, to bring money into the family coffers. After all, weren't good Italian boys supposed to earn their keep?

I can remember my brother's graduation day vividly because that was the day that Maria picked to make her prediction. I can see her now, as she stood waiting in her doorway, waiting for my mother and father as they returned from the graduation exercises with my brother.

Arms akimbo, hands on her hips, she greeted my parents saying, "E Don Rocco, che successo oggi?" "Don Rocco, what has happened today?" My father replied, with great pride, "Oggi, Nicolo si e laureato in biologia e Scienza." "This day Nicolo had received his degree in Biology and Science." Maria then asked, "Che vuol dire questo?" "What does this mean?" At this my father put his arm around my brother and proudly said, "Addesso, Nicolo po entrare in Universita di Medicina e Chirurgia." "It means that Nicolo may now enter the University of Medicine and Surgery."

This hit Maria like a thunderbolt. As the Ginney Block's faith healer, she had managed to sow the seeds of distrust for scientific medicine in the minds of many of the families of the block. Now she was going to be faced by a medical student who might eventually become a Doctor of Medicine and who would undoubtedly expose all her nostrums. Here was going to be a threat to her practice.

With mock commendation, plainly devoid of any sincerity, Maria said, "Va bene, Va bene." "Very good, Very good." She ended by saying, "Vediamo se e possibile. Io predire che un sarto non produrrre un Medico!" "We'll see if it is possible. I predict that a tailor cannot produce a Doctor!"

A Musical Bricklayer

Tom Moore was a black man who lived in the third small frame house located on the edge of the property directly behind the Ginney Block. He was a bachelor, small in stature and quite light in color. He probably was in his early forties. He had thick, curly hair and sported a pencil-thin, Jack Gilbert type, neatly trimmed mustache. Although his build was slight, he was quite muscular. This was most certainly due to the fact that he had been a construction worker for the past twenty years.

According to Tom, he had started as a laborer with the Vitale Construction Company, and had moved up to bricklayer's helper and hod carrier, carrying mortar and bricks to the bricklayers for a number of years, in countless construction jobs during the 1920's, years when building was booming in the downtown Cleveland Area.

As his story goes, Tom at age thirty, decided to go to night school at East Technical High School to learn the bricklayer's trade, even though he realized that as a black man it would be difficult or almost impossible for him to get a Union card, and to become a Union member. Being agile, nimble and good with his hands, it was reported that Tom had learned the bricklaying trade well, and on finishing the course, was able to convince the construction bosses of the Vitale Construction Company to put him to work informally, sans Union card, as a fill-in on days when one or another of the card holding bricklayers did not show up for work.

Before long, he had become quite a regular on the bricklaying line doing this on the sly, with the help of his bosses and coworkers, reverting only to bricklayer's helper when Union officials came around. Since Tom was free and easy with his beer money, his fellow workers did not report him.

It was said that Tom at age forty had become very skillful and fast, and could lay bricks as speedily as any card carrying bricklayer. The fact that he never missed a day unless he was really sick, had made him one of the most valuable men on the Vitale payroll. By the time that I got to know him, it was common knowledge in the neighborhood that Tom was making very good money for his position in life, as some of the paesanos in the Ginney Block put it.

The fact that Tom was making good money became evident by the things that he was able to buy, and by his life style, which was complemented by a natural inborn musical talent and love for popular music, particularly the jazz and blues forms. Tom apparently had picked up some informal musical training as a youngster in Harlem years before he moved to Cleveland as a young man. He had been taught how to play the piano by ear by his mother.

One of the first things that Tom did with his growing affluence was to buy a second-hand upright piano. Tom's love for popular music was rivaled only by his great love and lust for the charms of a variety of female types, whom he entertained regularly.

I prefer to remember Tom for his musical talent. I can still recall the many summer nights when I sat with others on the back porch of the Ginney Block, three stories above his small cottage, listening to him play for what appeared to be hours, one piece of blues or jazz after another. I have to admit that my love for the blues and jazz dates back to the listening pleasure that I derived from Tom's playing. It was at that time that I was introduced to the beautiful strains and style of Duke Ellington's music. How can I ever forget Duke Ellington's "Creole Love Call," "East Saint Louis Toodle-oo," or the many delightful Scott Joplin tunes as Tom played them, tunes that I still whistle when those luscious, nostalgic sounds come through the speakers of my car radio, as I drive to and from work these days?

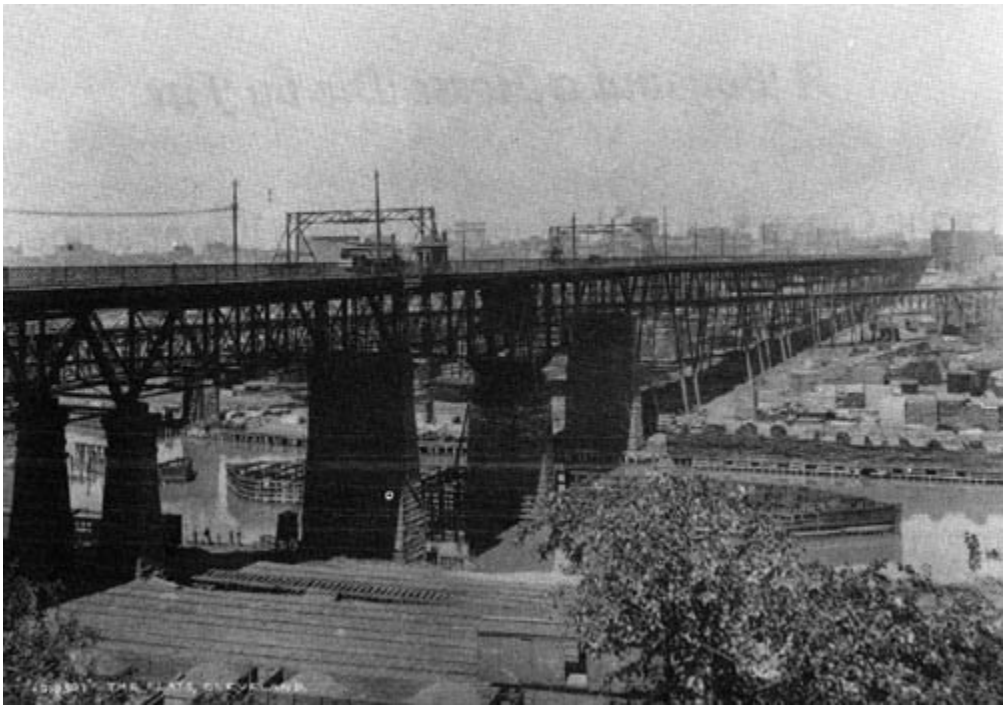
Although my memories of Tom are clouded by my youthful discovery of his womanizing, I will not forget the many hours of musical listening pleasure that he gave me as a youngster on those summer evenings many years ago, when I sat on the back porch of the Ginney Block.

A Boy and a Horse Die by Fire

The Ginney Block had no play areas like apartment house complexes have today. Unless we the children of the block went to the neighborhood public school playgrounds, we used the street and the little yard space that was available in the immediate vicinity of the block as play areas. A favorite place for play was the abandoned coal yard at the far west end of the block. There we played softball on a baseball diamond that we marked off ourselves by using large stones or pieces of wood as bases, digging them into the ground. When not playing softball, we would have our own little track meets, racing one another around the Ginney Block.

My memory takes me back to a Saturday in early May of 1924. Since school was still in session the nearby school playgrounds were not open. It was the School Board's practice in those days to open the school playgrounds after the school year ended.

At about 10:00 o'clock in the morning on this particular Saturday, my brother Art and I had met Danny Monteleone, one of my friends who lived a few doors away from me in the block, with the express purpose of taking a walk across the Central Viaduct, which was one of the bridges that spanned the Cuyahoga River, and which was the quickest way to get to the lower west side, where Danny's married sister Carrie lived.



The Central Viaduct where it crosses the Cuyahoga River circa 1904.
Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress

The Central Viaduct circa 1927
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

The day before, Danny had suggested that we go to the Jennings Road playground, where the city had a well equipped public play facility for children, which included swings, basketball and volleyball courts, wading pools, etc. Danny had told us that after playing there, we could go to visit his sister, who he said would feed us and where we would be welcome to spend the rest of the day.

I recall the day as a clear, sunny day, unusually warm for that time in May. We had a pleasant walk across the bridge, peeking through the railing at the river, hundreds of feet below as we walked. We spent about an hour at the Jennings play area, and then headed for Danny's sister house. When we got there, we were surprised to find that no one was home. By this time, we were quite hungry, so we decided to head for home.

We arrived at the Ginney Block at around 2:30 p.m. We had cut our return walk short by taking a short cut through the old Hay Market, through the alley behind the Old Bailey Company Warehouse, which brought us right into the old coal yard just in time for us to witness one of the most horrifying sights of our lives.

While we were gone, a couple of our friends, Johnny Pullella, Jimmy (Piggy) Pellegrino, and a few of the other children, had been attracted by an abandoned car, an old model T Ford, which had been left in the coal yard by some unknown person or persons some time ago.

The car had been stripped bare of many of its parts by persons unknown. All that remained were its chassis, the steering column and wheel, and the gasoline tank. For days we youngsters had enjoyed getting behind the wheel, imagining that we were driving and having a grand old time.On this fateful day, we arrived just in time to hear an explosion, and to see huge flames of fire shooting out of the car's gas tank, on to Johnny, and on to a large white horse and wagon that belonged to Harris the junk man, which were standing near the car. We saw Johnny running and leaping high into the air completely engulfed in flames. We saw the horse also in flames, break from the post to which it was tied, run across the coal yard and plunge, wagon and all, over the edge of the bluff.

As we came closer to the scene, we saw two of our neighborhood men jump onto Johnny with blankets, wrestle him to the ground, to put out the flames. By this time, Johnny's mother, who had been notified, came screaming out of the Ginney Block, tearing at her hair and clothing. Some of the other mothers restrained her and tried to console her as the men gently finished putting out the flames that still licked at Johnny's body.

The firemen, police and the ambulance arrived simultaneously to take Johnny to the hospital and put the car fire out. All this happened between 2:30 and 3:00 p. m. Around about supper time the news came to the Ginney Block that Johnny had died at 5:30 p. m. Later we learned from Piggy Pelligrino that Johnny, who was older, had ordered him to go to his home and get some matches, that Johnny had forced him to throw a lighted match into the capless gas tank. Piggy said that he was so frightened

that he ran as soon as he threw the match into the tank and so saved himself. He said that he had yelled at Johnny, telling him to run at the same moment, that Johnny had remained near the gas tank as though hypnotized. The families of the Ginney Block mourned Johnny's untimely and tragic death for months. The experience caused me to have nightmares during many of the months that followed.

The Main Public Library of the Cleveland Public Library in 1925

The Public Library Comes Into My Life

My love affair with books and libraries began in the year 1925. In May of that year, the Cleveland Public Library opened its brand new Main Library Building at the corner of East Third and Superior Avenue. I had heard about it for weeks before its opening from my school teachers, who from their reading of the newspapers and brochures advertising the public opening described it as a veritable treasure house. My appetite for reading and books had been aroused by Mrs. Benson who not only read to us but asked those of us who liked to read, to read aloud portions of books from time to time. I can recall Mrs. Benson telling us time after time how important it was to learn to read well and that books were the only real way to a good education. As a result of Mrs. Benson's enthusiasm and the good personal press that she gave the coming opening of the New Main Library, I was champing at the bit, so much so that by the time the day of the opening arrived I could hardly contain myself.

So it was that on a spring day, after school, instead of going straight home, I decided to go to the New Main Library. It was a good fifteen minute walk from the school. I had been told that the quickest way to get there was to walk down Eagle Street to Sheriff Street, then to East Fourth Street, that I would have to cross Prospect Avenue, Euclid Avenue to the Old Arcade, and that I should walk through the Arcade to its Superior Avenue exit, and that the Main Library would be right across the street on the north side of Superior Avenue.

The Old Arcade looking toward the Superior Avenue exit circa 1904.
Courtesy of the Prints & Photographs Division of the Library of Congress

I followed the directions carefully. As I walked, my anticipation grew with each step, all the time wondering what I would find and see when I got there. I began to imagine what it would be like to look at miles and miles of book shelves instead of the very small number of book shelves that I was used to in our school library. Mrs. Benson had told us that the New Main Library had been advertised as having miles of book shelves!

When I came out of the Old Arcade at the Superior Avenue side, there stood before me the most beautiful sight that my young already myopic eyes had ever seen. By this time in my life my teachers had started to tell me that they thought I needed eye glasses because I was beginning to have difficulty seeing the blackboard from the back rows of the classroom and had to be assigned a seat up in front of the room. In my youthful vanity, I had resisted taking their advice and had conveniently forgotten to tell my parents of my need for glasses.

As I looked upon the shiny, brand new building, gleaming in the bright afternoon sun, with its pure white stone, it almost blinded my poor little short-sighted eyes. I hurried across the street and hurtled myself up the front steps, pushed my way eagerly through the revolving door so that it spun around and around several times after my entry. The marble floors and walls; the beautifully decorated ceiling of the lobby from which hung the largest lighted globe of the world that I had ever seen in my short life time, dazzled me.

The lobby and the halls leading to the reading rooms on the first floor were decorated with gay banners and balloons of every color, more that I had ever seen in one place before! There were a lot of pretty ladies dressed in elegant, glorious looking dresses, the like of which I had not seen before. One of them came to me and said, "Young man, I'll bet that you are looking for the Lewis Carroll Room. That is where we have the kinds of books that you would like!" She guided me onto the elevator and told me to get off on the third floor and that if I turned to my right, go to the end of the corridor, I would find the Lewis Carroll Room. I found it all right, in a hurry! What a beautiful sight greeted my eyes there! There it was--a large room filled with book shelf after book shelf of brand new books. The walls above the bookshelves were decorated with posters of scenes depicting various illustrations from a number of children's classics. There were scenes from Treasure Island, Alice in Wonderland, and a number of other well-known children's books. I stood there wide-eyed for a few moments, drinking it all in! Then the most beautiful lady in the world came to me! How can I ever forget Miss Phipps? She introduced herself, saying I am Margaret Phipps. I am your children's librarian. She was wearing a nicely tailored suit, a kind of powdered blue. Her blonde bobbed hair and smooth, unblemished complexion gave her the kind of wholesome Americano look as was often described by the paesanos of the Ginney Block! She took me over to a bench in a corner of the room near the windows that overlooked East Third Street and asked me to be seated until she selected some books for me.

For the first time as I sat there waiting, I began to feel rather uneasy and out-of-place. I began thinking, what am I doing here in such a grand place, coming as I do from a four room, cold water walk up flat in the Ginney Block on Race Street? That feeling was soon erased when Miss Phipps came back to me with five or six brand new books, and handed them to me with the suggestion that I look them over and choose any four to take home, that in the meantime she would prepare some cards for me to take home for my parents to sign, and that I could bring the cards back when I returned the books, which she said that I could have for fourteen days. What a break, I thought! She is going to trust me with these nice new books! You can be sure that I did just as she said. I selected four books, took them home with the library application cards. Needless to say, I don't recall what the books were now, however, I do recall that I returned them within a week with the signed cards, which enabled me to get my first library card, which was in reality my "Open Sesame" to the wonderful new world of books, and which started my love affair with books and libraries!

Murder in the Ginney Block

Francesco Giovanelli and his wife Theresa moved into the Ginney Block in 1926. I remember the year because it was the year that I turned thirteen. In fact, they moved into the third floor flat down at the end of the block two doors from our flat, on my birthday. They were a handsome couple, young, probably in their thirties. They had come from Buffalo, New York, and had recently been married, and moved to Cleveland because of his work. He had come to work for the Tellings, Belle Vernon Milk Company as Sales Manager. Mr. Giovanelli was tall and was blessed with a dark olive complexion, pitch black hair that he wore plastered back, with a part in the middle. He bore a striking resemblance to Rudolph Valentino. He dressed well and wore three piece suits. On Sundays, he wore patent leather shoes with grey spats. From his vest pocket, dangled a gold chain and watch fob, necessary adjuncts to what appeared to be a well cared for Elgin watch. Since he had come from Sicily originally, he soon became known as Il Siciliano.

The day that the Gionvanelli's moved in, he caused quite a flurry among the women folk of the block , especially the younger ones, married and unmarried.

Theresa was the first blonde Italian woman that I had ever seen. She wore her natural blonde hair in a short attractive bob. Her complexion was clear and clean, the kind that some folks referred to as a "peaches and cream complexion."

She was a petite woman, slender and appeared to be quite fragile. She had a wonderful smile that was accentuated by her very friendly demeanor. She apparently loved children and soon became a favorite lady among the young urchins of the block. I, of course, fell in love with her and developed such a crush for her that I allowed myself to become her errand boy, not only running errands, but also doing small chores for her.

I soon learned that Mrs. Giovanelli was blonde and different than her husband because she had been born in northern Italy. The neighbors said that she had told them that she came from Milano.

It wasn't very long before Mr. Giovanelli came to call on us. He had heard that my father was a tailor and came to ask my father to make a suit for him, which my father agreed to do. I recall that since my father had to do it in between jobs that he was doing for his full-time employer, a custom tailor on Euclid Avenue, it took about ten days for my father to finish Mr. Giovanelli's suit. I remember several visits for fittings or "tryons" as tailors used to refer to them in those days. When the day of the final fitting came, I can recall how pleased Mr. Giovanelli was, so pleased that he gave me a quarter. He had selected a blue narrow pin stripe material. The suit was a perfect fit. He looked so elegant in it that he decided to wear it then and there! After paying for it, he wrapped up his old suit in a bundle and walked out of our flat, strutting like a peacock. For months he only wore that suit on Sundays and holidays.

We soon learned that Mr. Giovanelli was having to go out of town on business over weekends and for several days at a time quite regularly. After several months, everyone in the block began to notice a strange man who came to visit Mrs. Giovanelli, as regularly as Mr. Giovanelli went away. As a young teenager, it dawned on me that this man was her lover. My young, romantic, pure heart was broken. I stopped running errands and doing chores for Theresa Giovanelli, and found myself disliking her so much that I could not bring myself to look at her whenever I ran into her accidentally.

One Saturday afternoon in early summer of that year, I was sitting on the back porch, reading a book I had just brought home from the library, when I saw Mrs. Giovanelli's lover come up the back steps at the end of the porch and go into the Giovanelli flat.

About an hour later, I was still on the porch, reading my book, when to my surprise, I saw Mr. Giovanelli come up the back steps and go into his flat. I heard shouts and screams. Within seconds, Mr. Giovanelli ran out of his flat, down the back stairway, and disappeared, never to be seen again in the Ginney Block. I later learned that Mrs. Giovanelli and her lover had been killed, and that Mr. Giovanelli had been arrested.

Until the day that the Ginney Block was torn down, it was reported that the flat once occupied by the Giovanelli's was haunted by the ghosts of Theresa Giovanelli and her lover.

Wine Making Time in the Ginney Block

Every two years was wine making time in the Ginney Block. My father along with the heads of the other families in the block would spend several days in their cellars preparing their empty wine barrels to receive the new wine.

Since my father usually made two barrels of wine every two years, he would spend hours cleaning and scraping away the caked residue of old wine from the insides of each barrel. This ritual included a check and tightening of the wide metal bands that held the slats of the barrels together, to make sure that the barrels would not leak when they were filled. The spigots at the base of each barrel were removed, checked, cleaned or replaced before use to make sure that they would be safe and operational. The under sides of the top covers would be cleaned, scraped and checked for tightness, to insure that they would fit properly and seal the barrel tops tightly.

At harvest time, my father made his biennial trip to Dover, Ohio, located on the far northwest side of Cuyahoga County, to the area's most fruitful vineyards, where my father always said that the best Ohio blue grapes were grown. He had dealt with the same vineyardist for years. He had come to trust August Brandenburg because he allowed my father to select his grapes, basket by basket. My father swore that Mr. Brandenburg was honest and fair and said that he did not try to gouge him on the unit price of each basket of grapes.

I recall making the trip to the Brandenburg vineyards with my father, several times, on the big red interurban railway cars that in those days provided the only transportation from the Public Square of downtown Cleveland to the outlying areas of Cuyahoga County. They were exciting trips because they gave me a chance to get out into the country, where I could see grass, trees, miles and miles of open fields, where things were growing, and where I could see farm animals and other things that a city kid did not see very often. What a treat it was to get away from the stultifying environs of the Ginney Block, where one saw nothing but pavement and buildings; nothing but structures of brick, stone and steel. During every one of those trips, my spirit would be lifted at the moment that we reached the vineyards of Dover. What a thrill it was to see vineyard after vineyard with vines bulging with large, luscious blue grapes. It was a new and different world that brought invigorating breaths of fresh air for at least a part of one day to a youngster who slept in a windowless bedroom.

On arrival at the Dover railway station, I recall the short but very pleasant walk to the Brandenburg vineyard and house. It was via a narrow dirt road flanked by fenced-in grape vines that seemed endless. At the time of our biennial visit, a good part of the better grapes had been harvested and awaited us in bushel and half bushel baskets, stored in two large barns. It was in these barns that my father selected his grapes.

Mr. Brandenburg always promptly delivered the grapes the next day, early in the morning.

My father had everything ready on delivery day, the barrels, the wine press and the sterile, white rubber boots that my father wore to stomp the grapes into mash.

On delivery day, my brothers and I would help unload and carry the baskets of grapes to the cellar and then watch my father do the rest of the work. For some unknown reason when each of us reached the age of thirteen, we were allowed to don the white rubber boots, climb into the barrels half filled with grapes to stomp them into mash. It was such fun. We also enjoyed standing around the wine press, watching the virgin grape juice ooze out of the press outlets into the low wooden vats placed alongside the press. The big treat came when my father would allow us to bring our drinking glasses to taste the delicious grape Juice as it emerged fresh from the press. It was like nectar of the Gods, so sweet!

I recall the last time that we made wine in the Ginney Block. My brother Art, a young friend and I made the mistake of drinking a little too much of the fresh sweet fruit of the vine. Needless to say, we became very sick. Our friend became delirious. My brother and I fared differently. Our stomachs gurgled and growled. Our bowels began what we feared was to become a chronic perpetual movement. We found ourselves racing to the commode until we were exhausted.

Eventually by the end of the day, after nature had taken its full course, we fell into a deep sleep of exhaustion that kept us in the arms of Morpheus around the clock. From that day on, unfermented juice of the grape has had no appeal for me.

Kissing Games

With the advent of puberty and early teen years, the boys and girls of the Ginney Block were bubbling and some were even boiling with the biological juices of young manhood and womanhood. It followed naturally that they began to enjoy one another's company in the dimly lit stairways and vestibules of the block. Post Office and Spin the Bottle became a favorite evening pastime.

The mothers and fathers of the block had the custom of getting together on the back porches in the evening hours. The women in their shawls, gathered in little groups to talk about their children and to share their trials and tribulations with one another. The men in their groups almost nightly played "TRE SETTE," the most popular Italian card game of the time. Their enjoyment of the game was further enhanced by several bottles of homemade Italian red wine which were consumed during the course of the evening. It was while the parents were so engaged that the young people began to play kissing games. One night it might be Post Office and another night it might be Spin the Bottle.

We ranged in age from thirteen to fifteen. I was fourteen at the time, rather innocent and not as advanced in such things as the others. Also, by this time I had become an Altar Boy , and served at Saint Anthony's Church under the tutelage of Father Rocchi, who was constantly warning us about "the sins of the flesh," forever exhorting us to resist the "female charms," and to lead clean, pure lives, so we could eventually become priests.

Because of this, I had conscientiously stayed away from the kissing games.On a balmy Friday evening, I fell from grace. I came into the vestibule of the stairway that led to our flat on the third floor at about 8:30 p. m., having spent the after supper hours at the church at our weekly Altar Boys' meeting, to get ready for Sunday services. I entered the vestibule just as Lucille Moffo's spinning bottle came to a halt in from of me. Lucille was fifteen, very mature for her years, and well developed for her age. By this time in her life, she was using makeup, rouge, mascara, lipstick and a lot of Ten Cent store perfume, in great quantity. Before I knew what was happening, she crushed me to her breast and kissed me fiercely on the lips until they hurt from the pressure. I was almost overcome from the pungent smell of the heavy combination of her body odor, makeup and perfume. When I finally was able to break away, I flew up the two sets of twenty-seven steps, taking them two at a time, anxious to get rid of the lipstick and the unwelcome taste that filled my mouth. I proceeded to rinse my mouth and wash my face, time after time. Nevertheless, the taste and smell stayed with me throughout the night, and the experience haunted me as I tried to sleep. Sleep, however, did not come.

Although I felt resentment at having been kissed that way, I was plagued by the realization as Saturday morning dawned that I had also gotten some enjoyment out of the experience.

It was that realization that had kept me awake all night. I felt that I had committed a sin of the flesh, as described by Father Rocchi, and so mistakenly concluded that I was damned. Fortunately, it was Saturday. Like the good little Altar boy that I was, I hurried to confession that afternoon and so cleansed my soul of my first grievous sin of the flesh.

TB Comes to the Ginney Block

Mr. and Mrs. Michael Girolamo and children lived in the last flat on the third floor, at the east end of the Ginney Block. It was a known fact that the Girolamo family was having difficulty financially because Michael Girolamo, a carpenter, was not working regularly. As time passed, his pay days were fewer and fewer, bringing in less and less income. Enterprising Michelina Girolamo, his wife began to take in washing to add to the family exchequer. Since most of the families in the Ginney Block did their own laundry, Mrs. Girolamo soon found that doing laundry for others was not bringing an adequate supplement to the family income. Having no other recourse, the Girolamo family decided to take in a boarder. After all, several other families in the Ginney Block had done this, and experience had shown that room and board had been a rather lucrative additional source of income for those families.

So it was that the Girolamo family took in Giovanni Andriola, a bachelor who had recently come from Calabria, Italy, and for six months had been working in the Steel Mills in the Flats below the Ginney Block. Up until this time, he had been looking for an Italian family to live with. The Girolamos had learned about Giovanni from Maria Di Maria, who also had told them that Giovanni would pay well for his room and board because he was making good money in the steel mill.

Accommodations in the Girolamo flat were just as tight as in every other family's flat in the Block. In order to provide for

their boarder, they had to squeeze another small single bed and small clothing wardrobe into their son Joe's bedroom, which happened to be one of the two windowless bedrooms of the flat. Needless to say young Joe who was only nine years old suddenly found himself with a forty year old roommate in very cramped quarters.

Within a short time, Giovanni Andriola began to make the rounds, visiting the other families in the block to become acquainted. On Easter Sunday, he appeared at our door just before dinner. Since it was a holy day, the family was altogether, including my brother Nick, who by this time was a college pre-medical senior. Giovanni stayed for dinner.

As dinner progressed, we noticed that Giovanni Andriola kept coughing, at regular intervals, in a way distinctly different than the usual cold or flu cough, and that his cough seemed to rack his entire upper torso. Not being used to this type of coughing, I felt rather uncomfortable and somewhat annoyed by the constant hacking. At one point, as dinner came to an end, I saw a peculiar look on my brother Nick's face. After Giovanni Andriola left that evening, my brother advised my father and mother to boil all cups, glasses, dishes, cutlery and napkins use by Giovanni in scalding hot water. My brother also opened all the doors and windows to completely aerate our flat. He explained that he feared that Giovanni could have tuberculosis, and that these measures were necessary precautions to safeguard our family from the T. B. germs.

At Christmas time, we heard that Giovanni had entered the tuberculosis ward at City Hospital, where he died on New Year's Day of 1925, of what people at that time use to refer to as galloping consumption.

By Spring of the New Year, shortly after his tenth birthday, little Joe Girolamo was also sent to the City Hospital's T. B. ward, where he died on Palm Sunday. By June of the same year, his twelve year old sister, Theresa, succumbed to the dreaded lung disease at the same hospital. Before the end of the year, Michelina and her husband, Michael, were hospitalized at the same time, at City Hospital, where they too died as their children had, victims of the tragic illness brought into their home by Giovanni Andriola, their boarder.

A Ginney Block Kid Goes to Prison

Mr. and Mrs. Beniamino Puellella lived in the third last flat at the easterly end of the Ginney Block, on the third floor. They had three children, Jimmy, Maria and Anita. This is the story of Jimmy, the oldest, who was twenty-one at the time. Jimmy was a handsome young man, of average height, with fine features. He had pitch black hair. The neighbors used to say that he looked like Richard Barthelmess the movie star. Up until this time, Jimmy had lived a rather quiet life, working at odd jobs since he had quit school. On completion of the tenth grade in 1926, Jimmy had decided that he had had enough of school and that it was time for him to start making money.

As a youngster and through his teens, Jimmy had earned the love and respect of all the neighbors in the Ginney Block. It was a well deserved reputation because he was courteous, kind and generous, forever going out of his way to do chores, errands, and to help anyone who needed help of any kind. Yes, he had been the type that helped old ladies and old men to cross the street. I remember the many times that I saw him run up to one or another of the Ginney Block mothers who were returning from the Old Market House, carrying heavy baskets of food on both arms, to relieve them of their loads and carry the baskets of food into their homes, not ever expecting a cent for his services.

Central Market sidewalk stands circa 1931.
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

Within two year after leaving school, things changed for Jimmy. His lifestyle changed. His appearance changed. He had always been well groomed. He had always worn white shirts, ties and suits on Sundays, even though they were bought at the Salvation Army store on Prospect Avenue. In two years there was a complete metamorphosis. Jimmy no longer wore ties or suits. Day in and day out, he would appear in unpressed, unclean trousers, rumpled shirts, sans ties. As time passed, he neglected his hair and shaved less and less. Before too long, we learned that he had gotten in with the wrong crowd, a gang of a dozen young men who did not work, who slept late and stayed out all hours of the night.

This new and very different Jimmy had become a serious problem for Mr. and Mrs. Pullella. Those of us who lived on the third floor of the Block began to hear loud arguments between Jimmy and his parents. Every now and then, we would hear Mrs. Pullella weeping and begging Jimmy to change his ways. When the Pullellas learned that Jimmy had become a member of the gang known as "The Dirty Dozen," they told him to quit the gang or leave home. Jimmy left home. For a year thereafter, it seemed as though he and the gang had disappeared from the face of the earth. Everyone surmised that "The Dirty Dozen" had left the city. Some of the neighbors thought that the gang had gone to Pittsburgh. Before the end of the second year of the gang's disappearance, we learned that a gang had been caught in a large payroll robbery in Pittsburgh and that the members of the gang had been identified as "The Dirty Dozen," and that they had been sent to prison.

It so happened that the day that the Pullellas received the news that Jimmy was involved, I was in their home as the guest of their daughter Maria, doing homework since we were in the same grade in junior high school. I shall never forget the grief, sorrow, and trauma that the news brought into that household. Mr. Pullella began to cry silently. Hugh tears slipped down his timeworn, leathery face. Mrs. Pullella began to scream and tear at her hair and clothing. At one point, it seemed as though she had lost her mind completely, and seized a large knife from the kitchen cupboard drawer and was about to stab herself. Fortunately, her husband was quick enough to disarm her, while wrestling her to the floor. I, as a youngster of thirteen, having never seen such violent self destructive behavior, fled the Pullella home in great terror.

A Ginney Block Kid Becomes a Library Page

May 20, 1927, is a red letter day for me for two reasons. That was the day that Charles A. Lindbergh began his non-stop flight from New York to Paris, France! That was the day that the Lone Eagle, as he became known later on, took off in his little monoplane, the "Spirit of St. Louis, " and flew solo across the Atlantic Ocean. That was the day that I started my career in library work!

On that day, Lindbergh became a folk hero. On that day, I, a kid from the Ginney Block, became a page in the Brownell Junior High School Library, a branch of the Cleveland Public Library, at the age of fourteen, scheduled to work a few hours a day after school at sixteen cents an hour!

Imagine my excitement! Lindbergh, whom I had been hearing about for days, was actually flying over the great Atlantic Ocean at the very same time that Miss Dorothy Tobin, the school librarian, was teaching me the Dewey Decimal System, how to file cards, shelve books, etc. She would stop every so often to ask, " Where do you think Lindy is by now?" Although she was just as excited as I was about the flight, she continued to impress upon me how important it was for me to learn the classification system well. She emphasized the fact that if I did not do my job well, she could not do her job well.

Picture of the old Brownell Jr. High School building circa 1920, from the school publication entitled "The Meteor."

Miss Tobin was a friendly and kindly lady. I would guess that she could have been in her early thirties at the time. She was a couple of inches taller that I was, rather slender, with light brown hair, neatly coiffed into a stylish bob. She wore a white blouse, with skirt and jacket regularly. She had light blue eyes that sparkled and twinkled. She was fair of face, with a well formed, attractive nose, and a very pretty mouth. As an observing teenager, I used to conjecture that she could be much more attractive if she would vary her wardrobe and wear a pretty dress once in a while!

She might have looked old-fashioned because of her penchant for tailored blouses, skirts and jackets, but she was far from it! Besides books and people, she loved the outdoors, and loved to go on bird watches and to hike on weekends. She not only introduced me to library work, but also led me to the pleasures of hiking. She was never able to get me to go bird watching with her! That is where I drew the line.

My stay as a page at the Brownell Junior High School Library was to last only until the end of January 1928, upon graduation from the ninth grade at Brownell. Although my career there as a city school district library page only lasted eight months, Miss Tobin had done her job well! She had taken what she used to call her "little diamond in the rough," and had turned him into a first-class page. Hers was the inspiration that led me into library work. I shall not forget her.

We are Evicted from the Ginney Block

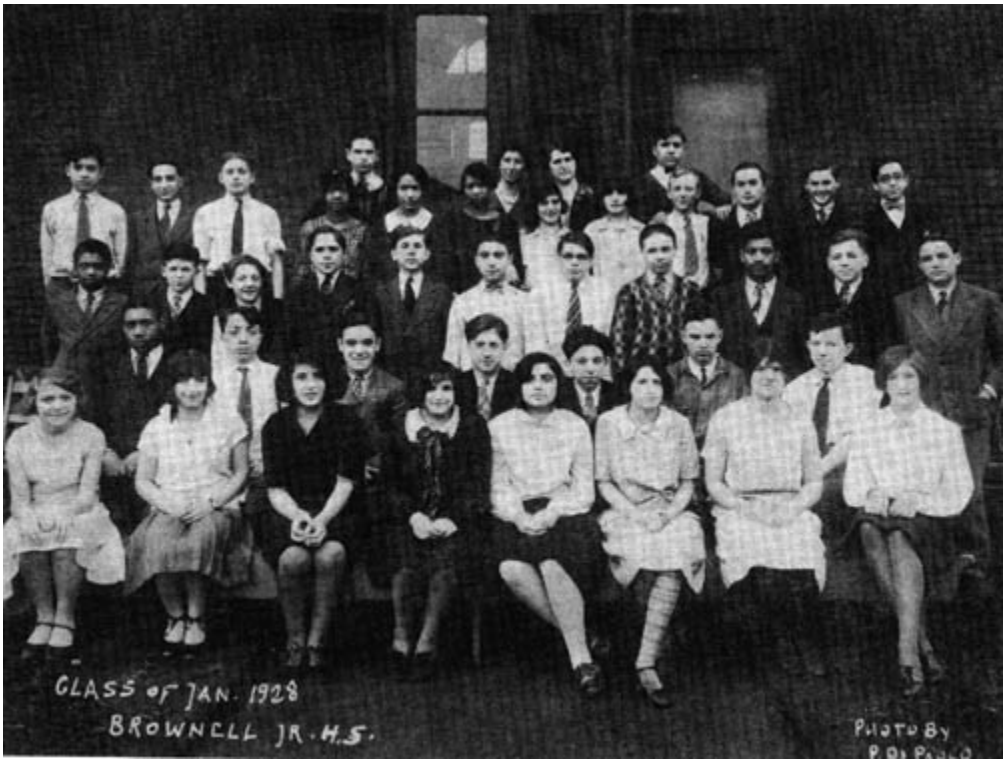
In the Fall of 1927, my father along with all the other heads of the households in the Ginney Block, received a letter from the rental office advising that the block was to be razed to make way for the building of the new railroad tracks that were to be brought into the new Union Terminal that was nearing completion on the Public Square. The letter gave notice that all the tenants of the block would have to vacate the premises by January 1, 1928. You can imagine the shock and sorrow that filled the hearts in every household in the block. For many families such as ours, the block had been our first and only home. The prospect of seeking and finding new places to live and the need to make plans to move either before or after Christmas was terrifying to contemplate. Needless to say there was many a tear shed by young and old alike in the Ginney Block. For me the trauma was compounded by the fact that I was to graduate from the ninth grade at Brownell Junior High School at the end of January. I was suddenly faced with the need to decide whether to transfer to whatever neighborhood high school might be closest or within the official boundaries of our new home, wherever it might be, or whether to finish my days at Brownell School, where I was President of the Student Council, and working part-time as a page in the school library.

Brownell Junior High School circa 1928. Showing part of the Gym and the Industrial Arts Buildings.
Courtesy of the Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio

As my parents wrestled with their job of finding a new place to live, I struggled with my decision to transfer or not to transfer at move time. Some time before the end of October, my parents' decision was made as a result of a coincidental visit by a former neighbor and tenant of the Ginney Block. The former neighbor and her family had a few years before found it financially possible to move out of the Hay Market district. They had first moved to a detached home on the near east side, on East 38th Street near Central Avenue. By this time in 1927, they had made another step upward homewise, by purchasing a newly built two family home located on East 116th Street between Buckeye and Kinsman Roads.

Having heard of our eviction notice, this former neighbor had come to us to offer my parents the invitation to rent her vacant six room upstairs suite in her recently purchased new home, in a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by people of Hungarian extraction. This would be a big step for my parents, not only because it meant moving away from the inner city and familiar community of paesanos, into a strange area made up of a different ethnic group, but also because it meant a steep increase in monthly rent. Imagine going from $10.00 to $40.00 per month! That in itself was a financial trauma for my father whose income as a tailor, working for a downtown custom tailor was around $15.00 per week!

The prospect of living in a new home, with all the modern conveniences, including a bathroom, and with a family of paesanos motivated my mother to convince my father to take the plunge. So it was that our family moved from the Ginney Block to the Southeast side of Cleveland at the end of 1927. With the



Brownell School Class of January 1928. The author appears at far right of fourth row.

move, my school decision was made simultaneously by me! I decided to finish the last month of my junior high school career at Brownell School.

I commuted by streetcar from East 116th Street and Buckeye Road to East 14th and Erie Street, where Brownell was located until graduation at the end of January 1928. During that last month at Brownell, during the first week after our move, I found myself, through force of habit, walking home after school to the Ginney Block, forgetting that I no longer lived there. Absent-mindedly, I made this mistake several times, feeling great homesickness and sorrow as I caught myself in the act, and each time turned and walked the other way, with a hollow feeling in my stomach.

A day or two before the end of my last semester at Brownell, it could have been a day or two before graduation, I decided to go to see the Ginney Block for the last time after school. I recall it as though it were yesterday. It was a cool, crisp January day. I recall that there was little snow on the ground. The sky was clear and blue and sunny for a change. At the end of the school day, I walked rapidly past the Erie Cemetery, crossed East 9th Street, continued down Eagle Avenue. As I passed by the old Eagle Elementary School, where I had gone through the sixth grade, I paused there momentarily, recalling old school chums and school teachers, along with the many hours spent in its gym and game rooms on winter evenings past and the fun times I had had on its playground during summer days in years gone by.

I quickly crossed Woodland and Broadway Avenues and ran with anticipation across Ontario Street, passing the Old Market House, another place filled with many pleasant memories, and sprinted down Race Street to its dead-end for one last look at the Ginney Block! I came to a sudden halt, stopped by a barricade and a workman with a red flag about a hundred yards from the block. I then saw to my great horror and distress a sight that I shall not forget. There in my direct view, was an obscene act of destruction in progress. A huge derrick, with an enormous wrecking ball of steel was viciously smashing at the walls of the Ginney Block. I stood there transfixed in blind anger and utter horror. I began yelling and screaming at the unfortunate workman, who had stopped me, as though he were the perpetrator of the horrible destruction.

Numb with grief, tears flowing freely down my cheeks, sobbing uncontrollably, I watched as great chunks of the Ginney Block came tumbling down.

As the stunned and surprised workman stood there staring at me in disbelief, I turned and fled from the sight! To this day, I can't remember how I managed to get back to my new home on East 116th Street.

So it was that the Ginney Block died at the end of January 1928 under the massive blows of an unfeeling ball of iron.

Epilogue

Since the demise of the Ginney Block, many changes have occurred in the old Hay Market District of the city of Cleveland. Progress and the ravages of time have taken their toll. Race Street has disappeared.

The Rolling Road disappeared around about the time that Race Street was excavated out of existence for the building of the railway approach to the Terminal Tower. The Old Market House once located across from the Rolling Road as an island between Ontario Street and East Fourth Street was destroyed by fire in the late forties. It was never rebuilt. The newer Sheriff Street Market northward on East 4th Street replaced it as the neighborhood market.

In short what was once the city's earliest settlement of Italian immigrants, with its distinctive shops and grocery stores such as Palmisanos, Zannonis and Galluccis, which except for Galluccis are now mere memories in that area. What was once one of the city's busiest market areas, filled almost daily with crowds of people of all nationalities who sought the popular imported and domestic Italian staples and delicacies, has been demolished, and paved over with traffic islands and freeway interchanges. The old Hay Market is gone! In recent time, there has been talk around the City of Cleveland and articles in the Plain Dealer about building a Domed Stadium on the site of the Old Central Market House. It is hard for me to visualize such a structure on that site.

Terminal Tower circa 1928 with the Old Market House in the foreground. From set of Etchings by Louis Conrad Rosenberg. Commissioned by the Van Sweringen Brothers.

From the collection of Frank Gerlak. Reproduced with his permission.

Will the last vestiges of the remaining landmarks of the area be wiped out by the wrecking ball as the Ginney Block was, so long ago? Will every last memory of the existence of one of Cleveland's most colorful areas be superceded by the Domed Stadium? Should that be the case, I hope that the reminiscences that make up this little book will help those who read them realize that once upon a time there was a Hay Market district settled by a group of hard working Italian Immigrants, who lived, loved, and raised families in a place known as The Ginney Block.

The D'Alessandro Family circa 1918
Front row(from left to right) Edward, the author, his father Rocco, his brother Art, his mother Isabella. rear row: (from left to right) brothers Sol and Nick

About the Author

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Mr. D'Alessandro was graduated Magna Cum Laude from John Carroll University (B. A.) in June of 1937, and subsequently from Western Reserve University Graduate School of Library Science. He was associated with the Cleveland Public Library for forty years, beginning as a page and student assistant while still in school. After completing his formal education, he held positions of increasing responsibility in branch libraries and in the Main Library of the Cleveland Library. He ended his career as Director of the Cleveland Public Library in 1970. He was called out of retirement to the Library of Congress by L. Quincy Mumford, the Librarian of Congress, in July 1970. Since then Mr. D'Alessandro has served the Library of Congress as Special assistant for Planning Management in the Reference Department, currently known as the Research Services Department.